

Future hotel subject of renewed talks this week

By Brock Weir

Business and community leaders are expected to converge once again at Town Hall this Thursday to continue building their case that a new hotel in Aurora is indeed feasible.

The working group, brought together this past spring by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, last met in May outlining a series of strategies designed to build a good business case on why potential hotel developers should look to Aurora.

Focusing on incentives as well as occupancy rates, the springtime meeting was followed by a meeting of the Town's Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC) which voted down a proposal by municipal staff to retain consultants to the tune of \$25,000 in the next budget cycle to construct a full feasibility study.

"We began to synthesize a way forward for Council to begin looking at developing an attraction strategy for the hotel," said Anthony Ierullo, Aurora's Manager of Strategic & Long Range Planning. "What we have done is we have broken it up into a couple of different phases, the idea being that phase one would set the context and at that point we could pause and look at all the various factors that might be involved, whether it is financials or marketing, or where are the real gaps and at that point we can look at what implementation strategies we could use.

"We didn't want to be in the position where we were recommending specific recommendation strategies without really understanding the context of where the issues are outside of what we have already framed for Council around some of the development charge issues we have talked about."

Committee members, however, said they were less than convinced this was the right way forward, preferring instead to look at in-house options rather than retaining a consultant.

"This type of dialogue and asking for money and doing more consultative work has been going on not for months, not for weeks, but for years," said Javed Khan, Chair of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Board. "I am just questioning are we going down that rabbit hole again? Should we not be looking at the work we have looked at already about this specific topic and look at what we have already collected and the data we can pull in-house rather than spending quite a bit of money?"

Following the last meeting of the Chamber's working group, the consensus was they needed to develop a method of surveying local businesses to gauge how they can support the level of occupancy or "heads on beds" potential hotel developers are looking for in new communities to measure viability.

Mr. Ierullo, however, said that a survey to measure potential "heads on beds" might not be enough.

"What you see here really is the basis of a feasibility study," said Mr. Ierullo. "We can debate whether a feasibility study is required or not" and I have come to this committee at various times to highlight the interest around a hotel "and I believe there are a number of groups that believe this project is feasible, but if we are going to begin building a strategy around a hotel, feasibility is at its core and that goes beyond canvassing the business community to determine the interest and support for a hotel on the ground locally."

While a motion asking EDAC recommend to Council earmarking \$25,000 be considered for a feasibility study when they tackle the 2017 Operating Budget later this year, this was voted down. A subsequent motion to conditionally approve the money pending further reports already in the works was also voted down.

"It is possible by the time we finish our budget deliberations that the work that has been done currently, and to come as well, may resolve the situation," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "We may end up with a couple of people that have plans going forward and we really don't need that feasibility study because there is something concrete, or it might be the reverse: some of the things we know of today might have fallen through by the time budget is over."

For Councillors in attendance at the meeting, the issue was larger than 'heads on beds', or even Development Charges for hotels levied by the Region of York, which Aurora lawmakers have often cited as the major roadblock to bringing a hotel to Town. It was about selling Aurora.

'No matter where you are locating a business ' in Sweden or BC or the States ' every Region has a different tax regime,' said Councillor Harold Kim. 'If you're going to make a decision based on just tax alone, I don't think those are the types of businesses we want on board because they are short sighted and when times are tough, are these owners going to have different strategies to keep their businesses going or are they going to fold short term?'

Added Councillor John Abel: 'Orangeville has three hotels. Charlottetown is a fraction of that and they have 40 hotels. We will never accomplish anything if we don't look around to see where others were successful and therefore say we're not a sleepy bedroom community. We're going to the next step.'